

Baucus buys ads praising child health bill

By MIKE DENNISON - Gazette State Bureau – Billings Gazette – October 3, 2007

HELENA - Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., took the unusual step this week of using his own campaign funds to buy broadcast ads chastising President Bush for an expected veto of the bill expanding government-funded health insurance for children.

The Baucus campaign made a "significant buy" of radio and television time for the commercial, which touts his bill to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, said Baucus spokesman Barrett Kaiser.

"It's about demonstrating Max's leadership on a critically important issue," Kaiser said. "It's also about standing up for what's right. Who cares if it's 13 months or three months (before the election)? It doesn't change the fact that Max Baucus is doing what's right for Montana's kids."

Baucus, 65, is up for re-election next year to a sixth consecutive six-year term in the U.S. Senate. He hasn't officially announced his candidacy.

His only declared opponent so far is Republican state Rep. Michael Lange of Billings.

The pro-CHIP ads, which began running Monday evening on radio stations statewide and on television Tuesday, are the first broadcast commercials funded by Baucus' 2008 campaign fund.

The Baucus campaign fund had \$4.3 million as of June 30. Kaiser declined Tuesday to reveal the cost of the commercials and purchased air time.

President Bush has vowed to veto the CHIP bill, which would expand government-funded health insurance for children from low- and moderate-income families.

In Montana, about 15,200 kids are insured by CHIP. A family of four in Montana can earn up to about \$36,000 and be eligible for CHIP coverage.

The Baucus bill, approved last week by Congress, would increase federal funding for the program and eventually lead to an additional 12,000 children being covered in Montana, his staff has said.

The Baucus ad features Abigail Tuhy, the young daughter of Fawn Tuhy of Missoula.

"Abigail is one of 14,000 Montana kids who count on the Children's Health Insurance Program," Baucus says in the opening of the ad.

He goes on to say that he has worked "to bring Democrats and Republicans together to expand health care for kids," and is disappointed that Bush has decided to veto "my bill."

"We can cover those 14,000 kids like Abigail for a year for what we spend in Iraq in a day," Baucus says in the commercial.

Kaiser said Baucus hopes Bush will reconsider the veto, but if it happens, Baucus will "work tooth and nail to override the veto."

Lange said Tuesday that he finds it interesting that Baucus is placing so much emphasis on CHIP, while not addressing the underlying problem: the rising cost of health care.

"I don't see anyone in Congress doing anything to address the cost," he said. "I think (CHIP) is a very shortsighted way to address health care; it doesn't get at the core problem."

The bill passed the Senate last week with 67 votes - enough to override a veto - but the House vote of 265-159

fell 22 votes short of the two-thirds needed to override a veto.

Montana's other U.S. senator, Democrat Jon Tester, voted for the bill, as did Montana's only House member, Republican Rep. Denny Rehberg.

Also Tuesday, Bill Kennedy, a Democrat running for Rehberg's seat in 2008, called on Rehberg to persuade fellow House Republicans to vote to override the veto.

"Doesn't Denny have enough clout after almost four terms in office to convince a few of his buddies to oppose the president's veto?" asked Kennedy, a Yellowstone County commissioner from Billings. "Denny can talk all he wants about how this bill is good for Montana, but if he's not doing everything in his power to override this veto, then his talk is nothing but a bunch of hot air."

Erik Iverson, chief of staff for Rehberg, said Tuesday that the congressman is working with Democrats and Republicans to override a veto. Iverson said eight House Democrats voted against the bill last week.

"Denny thinks the president is wrong on this, and that this is an issue that should transcend politics," Iverson said.